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THE BIBLE AND CHRISTIANITY

The Christian religion might be described as the projection of the religion of the Hebrews into the life of the world. It is rooted in biblical conceptions; its vocabulary is biblical; its basal authority is biblical. A Christianity that runs counter to the Bible would be admittedly a new Christianity. Speaking with historical accuracy, it would not be Christianity.

With some persons discussion stops with these generalizations. But it cannot and does not stop. For the fundamental question remains: What is the meaning of "biblical"? And of course that means: How is the Bible to be used? What is its relation to our religion?

One reply is ready for such questions: Use the texts of the Bible as literal formulas. Disregard their origin and use them as they stand. If the Bible is the Word of God, then its words are the words of God.

True, such an answer is generally modified in practice. Texts that champions of this verbal inspiration do not accept are explained away by elaborate and ingenious methods. No two groups of literalists ever agree. Each answers the other by biblical texts. Only those texts are final that support the particular literalist's views. Paedo-Baptists accommodate the proof-texts used by Baptists; Arminians explain away the scriptural bases of Calvinists; Protestants answer Catholics by appeal to favorite texts.

All this is commonplace. But by no means commonplace is the conviction that the existence of irreconcilable groups of Christians is testimony to a wrong method in the use of Scripture.

Christianity has really defined "biblical" as "an unhistorical understanding and use of the Bible." Instead of raising the question of method it has raised the question of orthodoxy. And there

is no orthodoxy in the proper use of the Bible. For orthodoxy is an authoritative formulation of results which biblical study must reach and not a description of the way in which truth is to be sought.

There can be no proper use of the Bible in theology until there is a proper understanding of the Bible as the record of an evolving religion. The Christianity of today is more than biblical, but it is genetically biblical. The arcs of successive stages of Christianity are longer, but the angle they subtend is the same. And that angle is the religion whose early developments and whose Master we can see in the Bible.

What terms, what social concepts, what institutions, expressed the developing religion is nonessential except that they are the medium of expression for a faith that bred true to itself. The idea of God as personal and moral; of sin as a violation of his will and so more than misery; of salvation as in some way due to fellowship with God; of forgiveness and rehabilitation through the divine Spirit—these conceptions set the tendency of the biblical religion and, embodied in the life and words of Jesus, set the tendency of Christianity.

Understood thus as the diary kept by a developing religion the Bible is of inestimable religious authority. Understood as a collection of theological statutes it is a hindrance to the progress of those very truths whose origin and development it records; piety becomes an attempt to re-establish outgrown ideas and ideals; Christianity becomes possible only for the ignorant.